

**Bernard Mohan: "Some insights from the Vancouver Project on Language/Content Integration"**

Professor Mohan's address disseminated the work of two large-scale projects carried out in schools in the Vancouver district of British Columbia developing integrated approaches to language and content learning in both the primary and secondary sector. He focused on the ways in which experienced teachers developed his theoretical work on knowledge frameworks into practical teaching strategies. While the projects were aimed at EAL students, the work was seen to have whole-school relevance and to be particularly appropriate to those classrooms where second language learners and native speakers are being taught together. The issue of how these two groups can be dealt with and progress assured for both has not always received enough attention, and, while it is not solely the responsibility of EAL specialists, they are in the best position because of their knowledge and expertise to spearhead developments.

The approach to teaching and learning taken by Professor Mohan was similar to that described by Pauline Gibbons: it was a functionalist approach, in contrast with the formalist approach which focuses on learning the language system and on second language acquisition in and of itself. A number of broader issues need to be taken into account, as second language learners are learning discourse and content or meaning at the same time as they are acquiring their second language. A language and content integration approach tries to bring these elements together into a coherent whole. The Vancouver project was essentially designed to help students to learn language and subject matter at the same time and make the point that simply concentrating on second language acquisition in isolation is not adequate, given the fact that EAL students take between five and eight years to catch up with their native speaking peers in academic language development.

The strategy used by the project was to work with knowledge structures. Looked at from a subject point of view, these are in effect graphic organisers for subject area knowledge; from the language point of view they are patterns of meaning and language that appear in discourse, whether written or oral. These are used at a broad planning level and also as a way of making the links between the areas of content and language explicit. These knowledge structures are not a method but a strategy that teachers use creatively, and they depend a good deal on teachers being able to take them further, adapt them to their circumstances and develop them in interesting and creative ways.

To illustrate their use, Professor Mohan showed an example of the format in a topic on whales. Content and activities were planned which linked with each of the elements of the knowledge framework (see Figure 1 below). As description, there might be an illustration or diagram of a whale, with different types of whales compared and contrasted. Under classification, whales could then be considered as part of the animal kingdom, looking at mammals, vertebrates and invertebrates. Work on the life of the whale and patterns of behaviour during the year provides a sequence. Then, students might consider the reasons whales behave as they do, which would mean looking for principle or cause and effect relation. The next area

might be to debate whether whales should be free or captive, and consider the issues on either side of that choice. This would lead into evaluation, considering the values behind that choice. The Vancouver project worked on this kind of topic planning, getting teachers to draw out the patterns of information and check on gaps in any of the knowledge structures covered. For the content teacher, the focus would be on the thinking skills that were part of the topic, and for the language teacher, the focus would be to develop some of the language and discourse that went with it.

	The Knowledge Framework	
Classification/Concepts	Principles	Evaluation
Description	Sequence	Choice

In a further study reported by Professor Mohan, the teacher researcher compared the use of the knowledge framework by a novice teacher and a more experienced teacher. Unsurprisingly, the novice teacher tended to be focused on immediate day-to-day issues, whereas the experienced teacher had a sense of the longer-term planning. The novice did not engage in a great deal of modelling or scaffolding of the work, and planned little group work. With the experienced teacher, there was a much longer cycle of work, with material being recycled and built up so that there was a recurrence of oral and written texts to build up the knowledge structures of language for content and for critical thinking. The novice teacher tried out the framework in a comparison and contrast diagram, but used it simply as a free-standing activity and did not refer to it again. The experienced teacher worked extensively with the knowledge structure in a series of activities, across a number of topics. First, in a Humanities topic, he used a comparison chart to brainstorm the language of comparison with the students and then modelled the same structure with a comparative character study on a novel; further charts were modelled and completed in a science topic, with peer-editing of students' work; he then modelled the writing of an introductory and concluding paragraph, and the pupils finally wrote their own paragraph using their chart as a model.

In conclusion, Professor Mohan re-emphasised his view that the strategy outlined depends on creative and thoughtful teachers, and that the involvement of EAL specialists is crucial because they have the focus and knowledge to make it work. The awareness of language as a medium of learning is something that EAL specialists have developed through their work, but is not usually shared by other teachers. However, EAL specialists can not succeed in implementing these strategies on their own – time, resources and the support of management are also needed if the benefits of this type of work are to be realised.

Conference delegates were appreciative of Professor Mohan's perspective on real teachers working in real classrooms. The examples of his theory working in practice could clearly be drawn on by delegates in working with pupils to develop academic language through the use of graphic representation and supporting them in making meaning and developing thinking skills across the whole curriculum. There were also important messages to take to our own debates on literacy, particularly in current work at Key Stage 3.